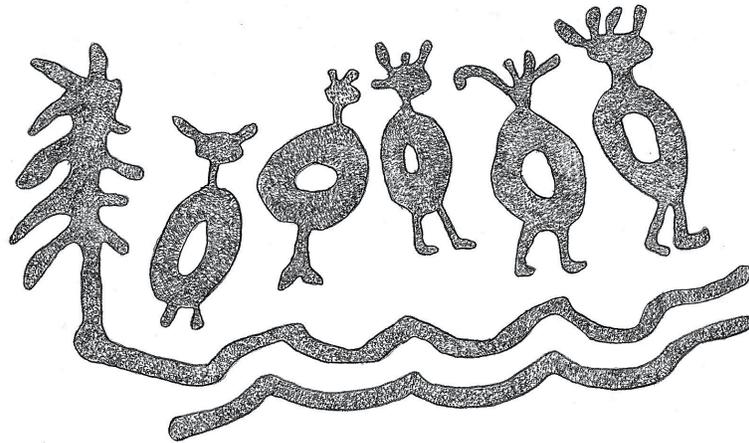
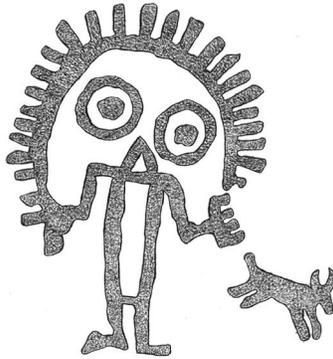


# Return to the Village

Thomas Doty



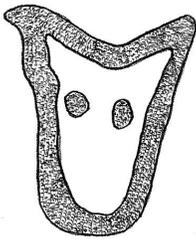
# Return to the Village



**A Doty & Coyote Story**

Thomas Doty

**Ashland, Oregon • 2020**



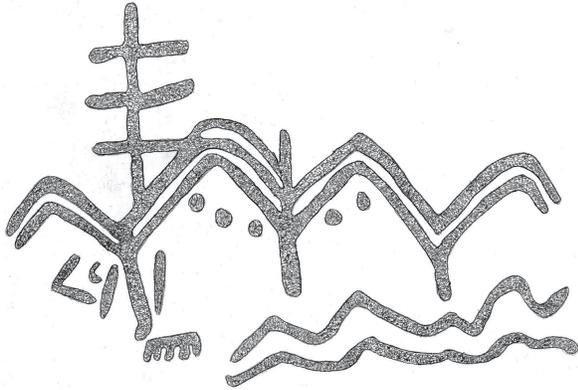
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The North and South Umpqua, and many smaller rivers and creeks, have their beginnings to the east in the springs and lakes of the Cascade Mountains. They tumble through rock canyons and flow through ancient forests to the gentle oak hills and valleys of the lowlands. Here the two forks of the Umpqua join and flow on to the Pacific Ocean.

Coyote and I have sauntered along many of the old trails in the depths of the Umpqua country. On this fall evening, our wandering has brought us to an old village site near downtown Roseburg.

Where Deer Creek flows into the South Umpqua River, the fall wind blows the night sky full of clouds. For centuries this wind brought the native people home, laden with berries and roots and dried salmon, eager for the winter season of storytelling. We imagine plank houses rising from the jumble of concrete and urban debris that is now the village site. Inside an Old Time house, we sit in flickering firelight and listen to a story of the people's journey home.

Wind whirls across the ripples of the river and ruffles Coyote's fur. He lets loose a howl of words that jolts both of us out of our dreamy views of the village.

"Whew! This place is a mess! Broken glass and concrete everywhere! And that graffiti sure falls short of an Old Time story."

"Maybe so," I say. "But imagine what it used to be like in the days when this village was breathing with native people and their stories."

"Imagine?" smirks Coyote. "You're funny. I don't have to imagine anything. I was there!"

"You remember this village?"

"Of course. And all the paths that lead to it."

"Did you see the people coming home to this village in the fall?"

"Many times."

"And the island in the river? Have you ever been there?"

"Yes, it's a magical place and the home of mythic heroes."

"Like who?"

"Like me!"

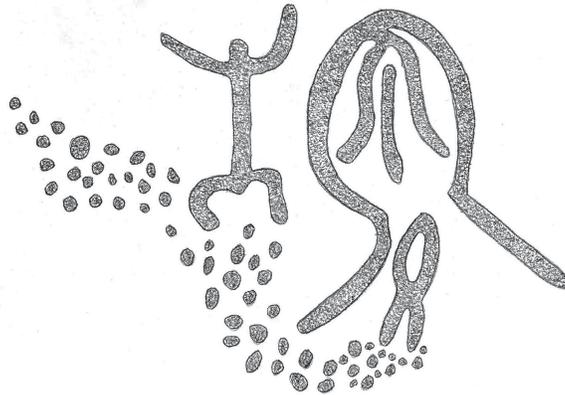
Coyote bounds to the river, leaps in and starts swimming toward the island. He yells back to me. “Want to see the Old Time journey home to this village?”

“Yes! But how?”

Coyote treads water and howls back an answer.

“As a wandering worder, you should know that anything is possible. Just look for the story!”

Coyote dog paddles to the island, shakes water off himself on the shore and disappears into the night shadows of the autumn woods.



I close my eyes. I strain to see the village again, and the picture grows vivid. On the riverbank I see the prows of several red–cedar canoes. Up and down the river, on both sides of Deer Creek, stand twenty cedar plank lodges. Each house is built partway into the earth and looks like it has grown out of the soil. The cellar–like lodges are stuffed with food for the winter ... berries, hazelnuts, acorns, tarweed seeds, cakes of camas, jerked deer meat, smoked salmon and dried lampreys.

The largest house is over fifty feet long. This is the dance and storytelling house. In my mind, I peer inside. It is smoky and dimly lit. The only light flickers from a fire in the center of the house. The dirt floor is smooth and clean. As my eyes adjust to the dimness, I see the faces of many people sitting in the shadows on woven mats.

An old woman stands and walks into the circle of firelight. With a subtle gesture she sweeps her audience’s attention toward herself. She speaks slowly and softly at first. As the room grabs her words and spreads them like smoke through the house, her voice grows stronger. Her word–pictures leap into the minds of her listeners.

“For as long as anyone can remember, White Deer has appeared when we needed her the most. It is told in the myths that she led the Old Ones here for the first time to make a new home.

She taught us to sing forgiveness to the Animal People before we hunt and to kill only those who are willing to give us the gift of food. When one of us is ill, White Deer shows up in the depths of night and sends the sickness away. Though her presence is felt among us all, there are few alive who have glimpsed her.

“I saw her when I was a child. It was in the high country. It was late fall and we were getting ready to come home. I wandered off by myself into the depths of a thick forest. The wind picked up, the first snow began to fall, and there she was, beautiful and white in the white snow. My mother called for me and White Deer disappeared into the blowing snow and the shadows of the woods.....”

I go deeper into the picture of this story and the storyteller’s words become my own.



I follow White Deer through the trees. Snow swirls around me and nearly covers the many stone circles that live in these woods. Snow changes the shapes of cairns and weighs heavy on the branches of medicine trees. I follow White Deer to the edge of a cliff that drops to a creek far below.

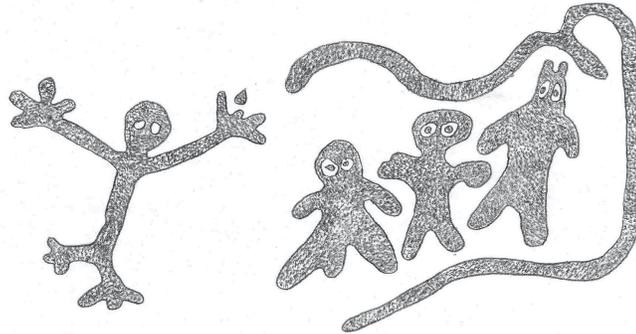
We scramble down through a crack in the rock and follow the creek to where it flows into the North Umpqua. We make slow progress along the rocky riverbank. Downriver, snow turns to cold rain. Toward twilight, White Deer leaps into the blue-green current and swims to the opposite shore. I wade the river and follow her as she climbs straight up the ridge and disappears.

This isn’t so good. It’s getting dark and I’m part way up a mountain in the rain. I recall that the old Indian trail mainly follows the spine of the ridge so I figure my best shot at not getting lost is to keep climbing. I switch-back up the ridge and eventually find a trail that leads higher up.

To keep myself going, I imagine more of the story of this place. In the spring the people leave their smoky winter lodges. Men and boys hunt along the rivers for ducks and geese. Women and girls gather shoots and early greens in the meadows, working their way through the valleys and into the high country, harvesting camas bulbs, salmonberries, thimbleberries, strawberries. By summer, lampreys and steelhead swell the rivers. They are smoked and dried near the falls. Yew wood bows and snares are repaired, and herds of deer are driven along brush fences and funneled into narrow canyons. In the evenings, in mountain huts made from limbs and woven mats, the people gather and play gambling games. They sing and share the best stories of the day.

Through the summer and into the fall, the people travel up and down the rivers and creeks, collecting food, collecting memories, collecting stories.

Where the trail jogs around a crag with a drop-off below, I stop to catch my breath. I hear voices on the breeze. They are coming from up the ridge. I climb higher and see shadows stretching through the trees. Folks must be sitting around a fire. Now if I can just get along this narrow ledge, I can....



I lose my footing, start to slip, when something like a furry paw grabs my arm and hoists me back onto my feet.

I look up and see Coyote looking back at me, grinning. I might have guessed. Good trick, Mister Trickster. I peer past Coyote and see two other figures sitting close to the fire at the mouth of a cave. They don't look particularly human.

"You're just in time," says Coyote. "We are about to tell a story and we need a human to play the part of an Old Time chief. Care to give it a try?"

"I'm honored."

"You might not feel that way once you get to know this guy. You'll see."

I sit down with Coyote and his critter friends, Bear and Panther, and story theatre emerges from the mouth of the cave.

***The Rise and Fall of the Boss of All Beings***  
***A Native Play for Three Animals and a Human***

**Panther:** This story begins a long time ago when me and my brother Wildcat are living in these mountains along the river.

**Bear:** I'm here, too, and so are the Salmon People and their many relations, and Crawfish, and Eagle and the Bird People, and many others.

**Panther:** We live in the shadow of a great mountain whose peak is white with snow all through the year. Up and down the river, in meadows lush with grass, and in the deep forests, our children play and grow and we live long, happy lives.

**Me:** Are there Human People yet?

**Bear:** Well, sort of. An early version of your species lives here. They are not so different than we Animal People.

**Coyote:** Less evolved perhaps.

**Bear:** That may be, but everyone speaks the same language. The Animal People and the Human People are the best of friends.

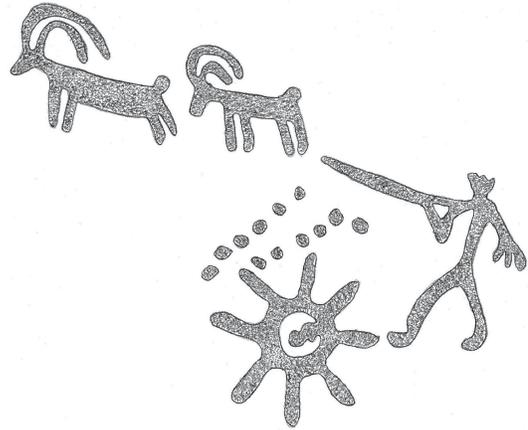
**Panther:** But this is about to change. There is one who grows up among your people who will alter the world forever. He boasts of his greatness.

**Coyote:** That's your cue, Doty.

**Me:** Right. Well.... “Listen to me everyone! I am the greatest man among you. I name myself Boss of All Beings.”

**Coyote:** Not bad. The name is good. But you can be a bigger bad guy than that. How about suggesting to your chums that it’s high time to improve their diet and start eating the Animal People.

**Me:** “All right, everyone,” says the boss man. “I know what’s best for us all. Let’s go hunting!”



**Panther:** Without warning, the Human People begin to kill us. We are scared and sad at the same time. Those who were our friends are quickly wiping us out.

**Bear:** We call a council here in this cave and we pray to Tamanous, the one who brought us into being. If the Human People continue to kill us, few of the Animal People will be left. It will be the end of our world.

**Coyote:** Just goes to show, you can’t trust anyone with two legs.

**Bear:** Wait a minute, Mister Dog. That’s not what this story is about.

**Coyote:** Right. You’ll see.

**Panther:** We Animal People talk. We tell the Human People that it is wrong to kill so many of us. But the Boss of All Beings tells the Humans....

**Coyote:** Your cue again, Doty. You’re a slow study, aren’t you?

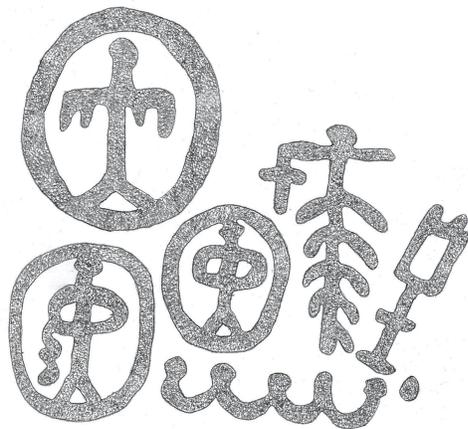
**Me:** “Don’t listen to that nobody,” says the boss. “He is a selfish leader of mere beasts. I ask you, would these animals taste so good if they hadn’t been put here for us to eat?”

**Panther:** The self-styled Boss of All Beings continues to poison the minds of his people. But there is one among us who is wise and speaks good words. Mister Bear is loved by everyone, and we consider him our leader. At the council of the Animal People, Bear says....

**Bear:** “We will ask Tamanous to come here. He will know what to do. He will help us.” I say to Eagle, “Fly as fast as you can to the home of Tamanous. Ask him to meet us here at the council.”

**Panther:** Eagle stretches his wings and soars out of the cave, upriver far to the east. He tells Tamanous, “That so-called Boss of All Beings is killing us, and those he doesn’t kill he is threatening to make slaves to steal our power. He says he will make wise Mister Bear his own slave and kill him if he refuses.”

Tamanous instructs Eagle to tell Bear to have the Animal People wait for him at the cave. He will meet them when the moon is full.



**Bear:** We wait for five days for the full moon. On that night, when the moon is high overhead, Tamanous keeps his promise and arrives at the cave. His words are few but contain a lot of power. He tells us we must leave this country.

**Panther:** We are afraid. We don’t know where to go. We trust the wisdom of Tamanous, but we are sad to leave this place that has been our home for so many years. Our hearts are unsettled.

**Bear:** I sleep for the passing of two moons and dream of our future. When I wake up, I tell the Bird People they must leave. Then I tell the Salmon People. Each day I tell different Animal People to leave. “We must obey Tamanous,” I say. After five days, all of the Animal People have

been told, and they are on their way. Except for Crawfish who cries and says, “I will dig a hole and stay here.”

**Panther:** Eagle tells Crawfish, “No. You cannot stay here.”

**Bear:** “How can I go?” asks Crawfish.

**Panther:** “Hang onto my foot,” says Eagle. “I will carry you.”

**Bear:** As Crawfish gets ready to leave, Wildcat shows up and sees Crawfish smiling.

**Coyote:** Wildcat says, “What are you so happy about?”

**Bear:** “I am leaving with the others,” says Crawfish. “I will hang onto Eagle’s foot and he will carry me.”

**Coyote:** “That’s a stupid idea,” says Wildcat. “I will save Eagle all that trouble and eat you right now. Yummy!”

**Panther:** Eagle hears this and swoops down. He grabs Wildcat’s ears with his talons and rips them.

**Coyote:** “Yeeeow!” screams Wildcat. “What have you done?!”

**Panther:** Wildcat’s ears are hot with pain. He backs away and spits at Eagle. He puffs out his fur and grins and says....

**Coyote:** “I don’t mind! My ears will look grand when they have healed. You watch. They’ll become the big cat fashion of the eons!”

**Panther:** As Wildcat nurses his sore ears, he watches Eagle fly away with Crawfish. Bear ambles by and Wildcat says to him....

**Coyote:** "I'll tell the Boss of All Beings that you have sent the Animal People away. He will be angry!"

**Bear:** I say, "You can back up and spit all you want. We are doing the right thing. You can just take your funny ears and go be the chief puppet of your bossy hero. Do what you will."

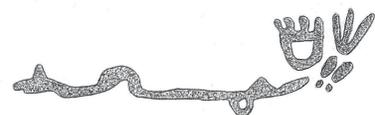
**Panther:** Wildcat does just that. When the Boss of All Beings hears what is up, he is steaming mad. He sends a runner to the cave to order Bear to come to his lodge.

**Coyote:** Human People are so clumsy. That runner takes a short cut to the cave and does his silly human dance across the narrow ledge that leads to the entrance. Sound familiar, Doty? He slips, and WHACK! As he gives his message to Bear, he is on his back staring at stars and the top of the entrance to the cave.

**Bear:** I tell the runner that the Animal People have left. Before he is on his feet, I head on up the trail to the top of the ridge.

**Panther:** Back at the boss man's lodge, Wildcat is being lazy by the fire in a petty catty sort of way. He admires his bushy tail. He waves it back and forth and watches it out of the corner of his eye, smiling his vain cat smile.

**Coyote:** Wildcat is thinking, "Now the Boss of All Beings will kill Bear and I will become the leader of the Animal People. What a cozy arrangement."



**Panther:** The runner comes back to the boss man's lodge. There is fear in his eyes as he delivers the message from Bear. "Bear is gone," he says. "And so are the others. No Salmon People. No Bird People. No creepy-crawly critters. Everyone is gone!"

The Boss of All Beings' eyes blaze with anger. He stomps outside and glares east toward the home of Tamanous. He chants his war chant for days and days.

**Coyote:** Wildcat gets bored. He wants attention. He tosses a silly grin to the Boss of All Beings, and waves his pretty tail.

**Panther:** The boss looks at Wildcat.

**Coyote:** Hop on it, Doty. Your line again!

**Me:** "Get out of here you rotten cat!" he yells. "I'm tired of you. Scat!"

**Panther:** Wildcat refuses to leave. Perhaps I should mention that he is my younger brother and at the time of this story is as stupid as younger brothers ever get. Just listen to what happens next.

**Coyote:** Silly cat Wildcat bends his back and walks backward and spits and hisses. The Boss of All Beings grabs Wildcat by the scruff of his neck and holds him over the fire until his bushy tail bursts into flames and burns off close to his back. He yells at Wildcat....

**Me:** "Add that to your feline wardrobe! You'll be a slit-eared cat without a tail for eternity!"

**Panther:** Tamanous hears the war chant. In a great gust of wind he arrives at the boss man's lodge.

**Bear:** Tamanous looks at Wildcat and says, "What have you done to Wildcat's tail?"

**Me:** "I burned it off," boasts the boss man. "I don't like him. He wants to be a big shot."

**Bear:** “You are a fool!” says Tamanous. “You have hurt the only one among the Animal People who likes you. Perhaps it is time for you and your followers to find a new home.”

**Me:** The Boss of All Beings says, “No, I will stay here.”



**Panther:** There is a great explosion upriver. A fierce, scorching wind screams down from the top of the mountain. All up and down the river, the Human People fall flat to the ground and cover themselves as best they can. Trees snap and crash, pulling their roots from deep within the earth. Hot ash rides on the wind and covers the Umpqua country. It buries camps and villages and clogs the rivers and creeks until they run muddy–brown and gray. The Human People cannot breathe the hot wind. They choke on the ash. They cry for rain.

**Bear:** The wind calls back in the voice of Tamanous, “You shall have no rain!!”

**Panther:** The mountain explodes again. Black smoke joins ash and spreads with the wind. The mountain spits sparks and hurls hot rocks into the sky. The mountain top lifts into the smoke and smashes down with a thunderous force that shakes the earth.

There is a deep hole where the mountain peak used to be. Over many years the hole fills with snowmelt and rainwater and makes a lake that is the deepest anyone has ever imagined.

**Bear:** The Human People are all dead. Their bodies have disappeared and their spirits walk over the rough landscape left from the eruption of the mountain.

**Coyote:** I told you this would end badly. But we coyotes are survivors. Look at me, I was there when the mountain exploded and here I am still. I could teach those Human People a thing or two.

**Bear:** Hold up, Mister Coyote. As difficult as it might be for you to understand, this story is not about you.

**Me:** That's what I tell him often.

**Coyote:** Now wait a minute. I know a different version that has me starring as the leader of the Animal People. It goes like this....

**Panther:** Perhaps we should get on with the ending of this story.

**Bear:** Tamanous says, "I will send the walking spirits of the Human People to their new village at the bottom of the lake. There they will live their lives without harm to anyone."

**Panther:** Tamanous orders the Boss of All Beings and the dead Human People to their lodges in the deepest depths of Crater Lake. There they live to this day in the bad company of each other, spirits of a people broken by their desires.

**Bear:** I return to this cave and take a nap. I dream the trees back onto the hills and mountain ridges. I dream the river back to flowing blue and green. When I wake up, I invite the Animal People to come home. Eagle flies in with the Bird People. The Salmon People and their relations return. Panther and his brother Wildcat, and all of the critters.... Everyone comes home.

**Coyote:** They are accompanied by survival-specialist Coyote who will teach them his clever skills on how to live forever in the hearts of everyone of importance.

**Bear:** Yes, even Coyote comes home.

**Panther:** But no one is happy. We miss those early days of friendship with the Human People. We pray to Tamanous to bring them back to us as they were before the Boss of All Beings had grown to power. We want to talk with them again.

**Bear:** Tamanous replies, “I will send Human People into your country but they will have a language of their own. There will be some Human People who will be able to translate from your language to theirs, and they will be leaders and healers. Seek them out when they are alone on the tops of mountains. Tell them this story so they may take it back to the new Human People and know where they come from.

“These new Human People will hunt a few of your people. But not too many. Everyone will survive and the story will remind us of what is important.”

**Panther:** The voice of Tamanous is carried by the wind along rivers and creeks, deep into canyons and across valleys. Everyone hears his words.

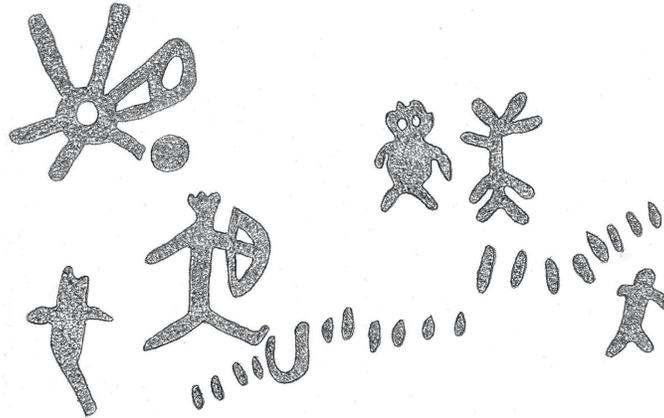
The Human People learn the story and live among us for many seasons. Every so often one of them climbs the mountain and gazes into the waters of Crater Lake. He watches the shadows of his ancestors in the depths. He listens to the story, and takes the story home.

**Coyote:** That’s your cue, Mister Storyteller. Oh, oh.... You’re too late again!

— The End —

I gaze into the fire. Coyote’s voice startles me, and I look up. Coyote and his friends are gone and I am alone in the night. I wander to the back of the cave. In what’s left of the flickering firelight, I see symbols painted red and blue on the cave wall. There are people arriving at the cave. Each of their heads has the same wavy shape as the cave opening. Here are people who have a deep connection to this place. There are symbols that suggest the teachings of ancient traditions, and a humorous warning about slipping off the ledge. There’s the trail along the ridge top, and below along the river, the lodges in the villages. The symbols show the way back to the main trail, to the right and up the slope to top of the ridge.

I walk back to the fire, add a log for warmth, stretch out and fall asleep.



The rain stops before dawn. In the first light, I follow the trail up the ridge to the junction and head downriver. I walk for days.

I imagine traveling home with the people through these shadowy forests of firs and cedars and pines, past bushes heavy with elderberries, and waterfalls swelled with the first rain of the season. I hear the clack of the final rock stacked on the vision quest cairn above Susan Creek. As I cross the river, I see the final few Chinook salmon swish their tails as they swim upriver at the end of the fall run. I climb the ridge and drop down into the next valley and follow Deer Creek toward the village. I smell smoke from burning fields that are torched every fall to encourage next year's growth of tarweed and blackberries. Field smoke mingles with wood smoke from the village. The first folks have come home and lit fires in their lodges.

Nighttime. There is silence as the story of my journey ends. I open my eyes and expect to see concrete. But I still see the village. The story has altered how I envision this ancient place. My eyes are open and a dreamy vision of Mythtime surrounds me.

Near the red-cedar canoes, I get a glimpse of White Deer as I slip into the current and swim toward the island, disappearing into the night fog. I gaze at the river and dream of White Deer's return.

"This place needs all the healing it can get," I whisper to myself.

I hear splashing from the middle of the river. Coyote appears out of the fog, dog paddling toward the village. The island is a magical place, indeed.

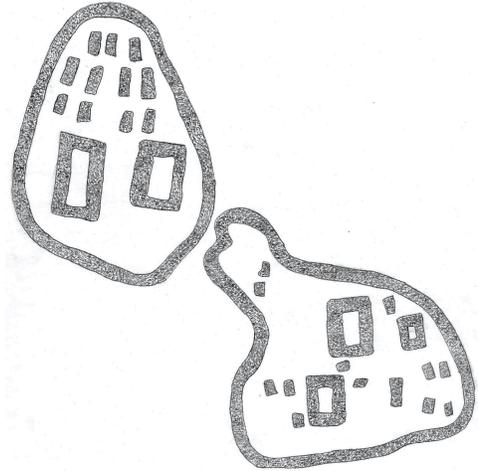
"Hey, Mister Storyteller, wait up! You can't start a new story without me!"

It is late. Roseburg is quiet. Coyote and I stand in the wind at the mouth of the creek. We hear the old woman's voice from inside the plank house.

“After seeing White Deer, I walk downriver with my parents and all our relations, and we bring our story home.”

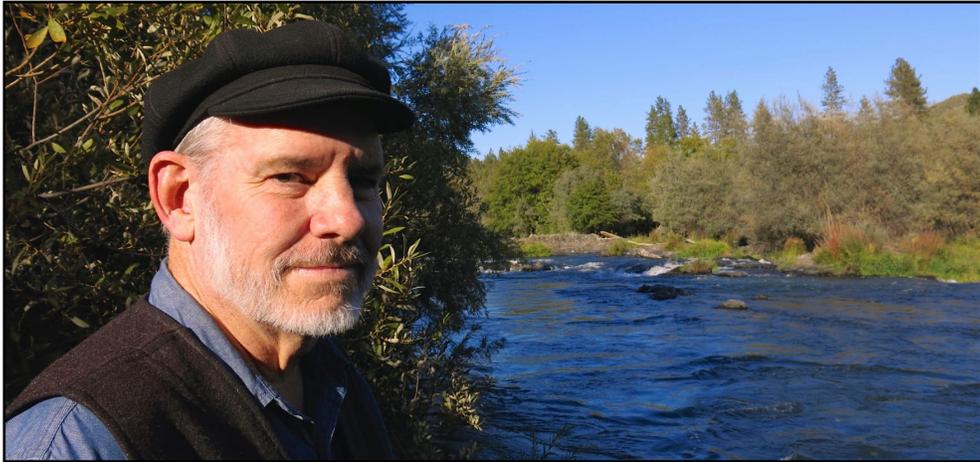
Leaves whirl off trees and make rafts in the river, floating downstream and out of sight. Fog gathers thick around the village and slowly swirls up Deer Creek. More voices and stories come from the lodge.

Coyote and I search for the door, find it and crawl inside to listen.



**“One of the best of Oregon’s storytellers!”**

**“A cultural treasure.” — “A master of his art.”**



Thomas Doty is a native storyteller. Since 1981, he has traveled the countryside performing traditional and original stories. He learned his art and native cultural traditions from elders, including listening to Grandma Maude, the family storyteller. Doty was born in southern Oregon where he still lives. He is descended from Irish and English settlers who settled in the Rogue Valley in the 1800s, and has family connections to Takelma and Shasta ancestors of the region.

He is the co-founder and co-director of Reading the Rocks, and the author of several books, including *Doty Meets Coyote*, a collection of 40 traditional and original native stories published in 2016 by Blackstone Publishing. His stories have been broadcast on Public Radio, and he is the recipient of a Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award from the national American Indian Program.

**[www.DotyCoyote.com](http://www.DotyCoyote.com)**